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**SERMON LXXXVIII.**

By WILLIAM T. HAMILTON, A.M.

NEWARK, N. J.

**WHY THE WICKED ARE SUFFERED TO LIVE.**

JOB, xxi. 7.—*Wherefore do the wicked live?*

THE existence of sin, and the frequent prosperity of the wicked, have in every age presented ground for much speculation and great diversity of opinion. Job has not been the only one, who, on beholding these things taking place under the eye of the Omniscient and Holy One, has inquired with anxiety, *wherefore do the wicked live?*

An answer to this inquiry I shall attempt, by stating some of the most obvious *reasons why the wicked may be suffered to live.*

In morals, a safe standard of judging is to be found only in the Scriptures of truth:—there we find but one line of distinction laid down to determine the character of men; all are either righteous or wicked,—friends or enemies to God: guided by this infallible rule, we find that not only the openly vicious, but every unbeliever, must be ranked with the wicked. The impenitent and unbelieving, however amiable as men and useful as citizens, must eventually sink under the frown of an offended God, as certainly as the openly abandoned, the unjust, the deceitful, and the profane. Why then are the wicked suffered to continue in life?

**1. TO PROLONG THEIR OPPORTUNITY FOR BECOMING RECONCILED TO GOD.**

Every sin, whether of action, word, or thought, is a violation of God's law, and exposes the transgressor to his curse. No man can plead guiltless: all are already under sentence of condemnation, as rebels against God. But by the mediation of Jesus Christ, men are brought into a new condition of trial: the terms are no longer do this and live; but to those actually under sentence of condemnation a reprieve is granted, while proposals, rich in grace, are held out, acceptance of which reverses the dreadful sentence, brings the transgressor into favor with God, and more than repairs the ruins of the fall: rejection of these proposals seals the curse irrevocable, and ensures aggravated condemnation. Now, "God," who "is not desirous that any should perish, but that all should come to the knowledge of the truth"—spreads these gracious terms before men, wherever the Gospel is preached, and "*commands all men, every where, to repent.*"

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The wicked, although even now under condemnation for their sins, are yet suffered to live that they may enjoy the benefit of this provision. A full view of their guilt and their alarming prospects is spread before them in God's word, the entreaty to turn and live is perpetually sounded in their ears, and motives manifold and urgent, meet them on every hand, to flee from the wrath to come, and lay hold on eternal life. They are on trial, and trial implies the power to neglect duty, if we choose so to do. At death, this trial terminates, and all possibility of restoration to the Divine favor, if not secured before, then ceases for ever.

The wicked have souls; for whose cleansing a Savior's blood will avail, if they but seek to have it applied to them; souls endowed with vast capacities to suffer or to enjoy; souls, whose interests are enduring and indestructible as the throne of God; souls, whose condition for eternity is suspended on the issue of this life, brief at best! No wonder, then, since their removal, while impenitent, would plunge them at once into remediless woe, that the wicked are suffered to continue many years, that their trial may be prolonged, and every possible advantage afforded them, to escape the doom they deserve, and take refuge near the throne of mercy! Let us, then, keep in view the vast capacities of the human soul, the nature of probation, and the unutterable interests involved in its issue, when with Job we inquire, *wherefore do the wicked live?*

But the wicked may be suffered to live,

## 2. FOR THE BENEFIT OF OTHERS :

Some, who have contemptuously spurned the offer of mercy, and are already ripe for destruction, may, nevertheless, be suffered to live many years for the sake of their families, to provide for and educate their children, among whom there may be those whom God shall claim as his; and who, he discerns, could not be so well disciplined and prepared for the stations he designs them hereafter to fill, as they will be by having just such an education, and witnessing just such an example, as the continuance of the parent will furnish. Possibly the scoffs and blasphemies, the cold formality, or the worldly life of the parent, may excite the most salutary emotions in the minds of the children. The stoical indifference of one parent to all the solemn interests of the soul, contrasted with the uniform fervor, the trembling solicitude, the conscientious simplicity of the other, may be the instrument of awakening reflection in the minds of the children, unmasking the world to their view, and kindling within them effectual desires after a better portion.

Some among the wicked may be suffered to live at ease, till every thing is ready to render the circumstances of their death widely impressive upon their acquaintances. Others may be suffered to live and prosper, because of the influence they are exerting for the good of society, in promoting the education of the young, furnishing the pious poor with employment and sustenance, and indirectly preparing the way for the approach of those glorious times, predicted in the Bible, when all shall know the Lord. The dispensations of God's providence are conducted on a regular and an infinitely wise plan: and it may yet be seen, that all the writings of infidels, all the discoveries and the frequently blasphemous perversions of science, all the revolutions of empire produced by ambition, were only preparing the way for such a state of

society as will be found needful for the general diffusion of the truth, and the conversion of the world to holiness : and consequently, that all the proud, and ambitious, and blasphemous, who took part in those preparatory measures, were suffered to live, notwithstanding their wickedness, for the sake of the beneficial results, which, in spite of their different intentions, will have been made to arise from their doings.

Cyrus knew not God ;—but he was suffered to live and prosper, for the sake of the good he would accomplish to God's people Israel. The Romans knew not God, but they were suffered to prevail, and prepare the way for the spread of the Gospel. So it may be now with many who know not God : they may be continued to aid in supporting the institutions of the Gospel, where they live ; which, though they themselves reject it, may prepare their children for a place in heaven. Or they may live, that, by the influence which they indirectly exert, and with intentions just the reverse, they may aid in fulfilling God's purposes of mercy to bring in the latter day glory. Just as Joseph's brethren, in the very steps they maliciously took to prevent his anticipated elevation, were only smoothing the way for its more speedy accomplishment.

The wicked live, then, I would remark,

3. THAT THEY MAY CONTRIBUTE TO MATURE THE PIETY, ELEVATE THE CHARACTER, AND HEIGHTEN THE FUTURE FELICITY OF THE SAINTS.

This world is a scene of trial to all its inhabitants : the ungodly in Gospel lands are under trial to determine whether they will embrace the Gospel and be saved ; and every act affects their final destiny, just so far as it tends to prepare them to accept or to reject salvation. The righteous are also under trial, to decide what advances they will make in holiness.

If the Christian had no difficulties, no opposition to contend with in his course through life, he could not possibly make such advances in holiness as now he may. Trial strengthens all the powers of the regenerate nature. It *invigorates faith*. When Abraham's faith had been subjected to the trial of offering up his beloved Isaac, it was not only shown to be genuine, by his cheerful obedience, but it was strengthened by the discipline which that obedience included. He would, thenceforth, have a firmer faith in God's power, and in his faithfulness to his promises than ever before. Thus it was, that "his faith wrought with his works, and by works (i. e. by acting under the influence of faith) was his faith made perfect," or established.

Job was a patient man, before his severe afflictions ; but those trials at once discovered the greatness of his patience, his submission to the will of God, and strengthened these dispositions in his soul. The Prophets, who lived in times of prevailing wickedness, and whose blood was shed in the service of God ; the Apostles, and the martyrs of the primitive Church, who suffered persecution, famine, nakedness, the loss of all things, and laid down their lives for the testimony of Jesus ; in so doing not only evinced the reality of their faith, but they were strengthening it by every trial. The act of relying habitually on the word of truth, amid discouragements on every hand—submitting to self-denial, and loss, and pain, and ignominy, for the sake of Christ, could not fail to nourish a more vigorous faith, a deeper humility, a

more heavenly temper, than if they had met with fewer difficulties, if they had lived in less perilous times. And even where no bloody persecution rages,—and no open opposition is urged against the Gospel or its professors, just so far as the wicked prosper, does the very spectacle of their triumph call forth in the righteous a firmer faith in God's word, where alone is found the true solution to all the difficulties involved in this state of things. And just so far as the influence of the wicked is felt in any community or in any family circle, against true religion in all the fulness of its demands, in all the heavenliness of its spirit, it calls into more active operation, not only the faith of Christians, but also their forbearance, patience, and meekness. The more ensnaring are the allurements of the world, the firmer will be the purpose, the more determined the resolution required of Christians to resist them. And since every true Christian will resist them (however few they may be among the number of graceless professors, whose love waxes cold, when iniquity abounds), it follows that the existence of the wicked becomes incidentally advantageous to the righteous, whom they despise. The very contempt they exhibit towards Christians, the enticements they employ to ensnare them, the calumnies they propagate against them, the opposition they make to the accomplishment of their plans of benevolence, all become means to render them more firm in faith, and more uniformly humble, self-denying, and circumspect. Every disappointment, and every instance of opposition they meet with is contributing to render true Christians more holy, more spiritual, more like Jesus Christ: and of consequence, because inward holiness is the spring of true enjoyment, it is contributing to heighten their felicity. Hence the Scriptures call upon Christians to rejoice in trials;—"that the trial of their faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, may be found unto praise, and honor, and glory, at the appearing of Jesus Christ:" which manifestly implies, that the Christian, when he has passed honorably through trials, will obtain a higher felicity as the consequence. So that, if the wicked are the means of presenting such trials, they are thereby unintentionally toiling to heighten the present, and more especially the future felicity of God's people, in preparing them to reap a richer reward on high. This thought our Lord himself presents in that memorable passage, "blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you, falsely, for my sake:—rejoice, and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven."

Were the wicked early cut off in their career of wickedness, were the ebullitions of their hatred against God's truth and against God's people uniformly restrained, the saints would not be subjected to this salutary discipline; they would fail of that great and peculiar reward in heaven, which, in this way alone, they can obtain. If, then, at any time, my Christian friends, you behold the wicked prospering in their wickedness, setting their mouth against the very heavens, and with desponding heart you begin to inquire, "Wherefore do the wicked live?"—remember, that if faithful to your Lord, to his cause, and to your souls, they are only toiling to render you more holy,—and prepare for you a brighter crown on high.

## 4. Another reason why the wicked may be suffered to live is,

THAT THEREBY AN AFFECTING EXHIBITION IS PRESENTED OF THE LOVELINESS OF THE DIVINE CHARACTER.

The forbearance of God is hereby strikingly discovered. God is *immutable*; he is now as irreconcilably opposed to sin as he was when he first promulgated his holy law, and pronounced its awful sanction: as he was, when for their sin, he hurled the arch-apostate and his rebel angels down to the gulf of perdition. Towards them, so far as we are informed, no forbearance was exercised, but vengeance followed close on the act of transgression. And had God inflicted like speedy punishment on the transgressors of *our* race, it would have been strictly just; all heaven would have approved it well: but then the long-suffering of God would not have been brought to light.

It is not because sin is less intrinsically evil now than at any past period; not because sin is not as truly hateful in men as in angels, as truly deserving God's wrath in us as in them; but because God is "willing to show the riches of his forbearance" towards men, that the wicked are suffered to live. It is not because God does not see and abhor the wickedness of the wicked, that they are suffered to proceed to such lengths in iniquity as are sometimes witnessed; not because God has not a tender regard for his afflicted people, that the wicked are permitted sometimes to rage against them, and cause their bosoms to labor with grief;—not because God has not a lively feeling for the honor of his name, that men are sometimes heard to blaspheme that holy name, rail at his adorable perfections, and even deny his existence, while no sudden vengeance stops their breath;—but it is, because God will give undeniable evidence of his amazing long-suffering. What then, if God "endure with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction?" Having taken occasion, from their wickedness to magnify the riches of his forbearance in time, eternity will be long enough to exhibit his justice in their punishment.

Not only, however, is the long-suffering of God illustrated by the continuance of the wicked on earth,—his goodness is equally shown in the unmerited and unrequited beneficence he expends upon them.

God not only bears with the wicked, for months, and years, in long succession—forbears to inflict merited punishment; but he loads them with the choice bounties of his providence. God is truly "kind to the unthankful and to the evil: he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good—and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust!" How affecting the lesson here presented to us, when the Omnipotent God, whose frown would make the wicked pine and wither in unutterable anguish—the Omniscient, whom no secret thought of evil can escape—not only bears with the wicked, amid all their bold rebellion, and withdraws not the bounties of his providence from their persons and their possessions, but pours temporal favors—all that can render life desirable, into the lap of the wicked, as commonly as into the lap of the saints! How powerful the motive hereby urged upon us in the example of God's rich beneficence towards his enemies, that we, by loving our enemies,



and doing good without expecting an equivalent in return, evince ourselves to be the children of so benignant a Father in heaven!

And when the question arises in our minds, "*Wherefore do the wicked live?*" let us answer it by the lovely spectacle which, from their continuance here, God takes occasion to exhibit in this guilty world, in which the enemies of God, the bold transgressors of his holy law, are not only patiently borne with, but daily loaded with the unrequited bounties of his hand—as though he were determined to subdue their opposition, and melt their obduracy by his unspeakable goodness:—truly, "*the wrath of man shall praise him!*"

5. The end to be answered by the continuance of the wicked, is found in

THE EVIDENCE THEREBY FURNISHED OF A FUTURE STATE OF RETRIBUTION.

This life might still be a state of probation, even were the first actual transgression followed by instant death; or, were a certain amount of iniquity (far less than is now commonly perpetrated) the utmost that should be tolerated without bringing down certain destruction. But such manifest and uniform infliction of punishment on transgressors could scarcely fail to give birth to the opinion, that this life is the whole period of human existence. It would certainly leave far less evidence corroborative of the doctrine of future rewards and punishments, than the present arrangements of God's providence furnish. It is, indeed, true, that "godliness is profitable unto all things:" and, generally speaking, each one who tries it for himself will find, that "in keeping God's commandments there is great reward:" "wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness—and all her paths are peace." True religion brings in its train more genuine happiness than can be attained without it. Yet it is equally true, that every where, riches, honor, and influence are to a greater extent found in the hands of those who, if judged by Scripture rules, must be pronounced wicked, than in the possession of the pious. It is an undeniable fact, that the wicked, yea, the notoriously wicked, are often known to enjoy great and uniform prosperity till their death: "they are not in trouble as other men, neither are they plagued like other men: they set their mouth against the heavens; their eyes stand out with fatness; they have more than heart can wish;"—while not unfrequently it is found, that "many are the afflictions of the righteous; and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them." There have been times, when in the bitterness of their spirit, the afflicted righteous have been tempted to exclaim, "is there knowledge in the Most High?"—"verily we have cleansed our heart in vain, and washed our hands in innocency!"—and this state of things has ever been regarded by reflecting men, whether Heathen or Christians, as furnishing satisfactory ground, in view of the justice of God, to argue a future state of retribution. From the course of providence in this world, we can derive no conclusive evidence, "that the Judge of all the earth will do right;" and hence we feel a livelier interest, and a firmer confidence in the information furnished us in the Scriptures, of a "day which God hath appointed, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness, and render to every man according to his works." When, therefore, perplexed by the apparent confusion around us, we feel the inquiry

rising, "*Wherefore do the wicked live?*" let us meet it with the thankful acknowledgment of the evidence we thence derive, that a day is approaching, when every difficulty will be removed by an impartial judgment.

Lastly, The wicked live to FURNISH MORE DECISIVE EVIDENCE OF THE JUSTICE OF GOD IN THE DISPOSAL HE WILL FINALLY MAKE OF THEM.

The events of every day are doing something towards trying and proving us; calling into exercise some of our moral feelings, and giving distinctness and prominence to the several features of our moral nature. As trial exercises, and thus invigorates the right feelings of the good, so it exhibits and confirms the wrong feelings of the wicked: while the truly good are advancing every day in goodness; the evil are progressing every day in wickedness. The longer the righteous live, and the more they advance in holiness, the more abundant is the evidence they will furnish, of the reasonableness of that distinction to which God will graciously advance them. In like manner, the longer the wicked live, the more they will grow in wickedness, and consequently the more manifest will be the reasons why God consigns them to eternal darkness.

No doubt, there will be evidence to show satisfactorily, that every one receives a righteous award. But with those who have lived long, and have fully developed the wickedness of their hearts in the actions of their lives, the reasons of their doom will be more palpably obvious. If Pharaoh had not lived so long, he could not have acted so wickedly, and would not have been so conspicuous a monument of God's righteous vengeance. Now, God does give us to understand, in his holy word, that when men have long disregarded the admonitions of conscience, and the strivings of his Spirit, and all the means of amendment, and thus show that they are intent on their own destruction, he withdraws his Spirit, and leaves them to their own hearts' lusts, that they may press on rapidly in wickedness, and prepare themselves for more signal punishment. Thus for their great wickedness the Amorites were forsaken of God, till they should fill up the measure of their iniquities. God's forbearance had been tried to the utmost; the very land groaned under their wickedness; and signal vengeance fell upon them. Our blessed Redeemer said to the Jews, when they plainly showed that they were determined to resist all the evidence of his mission from God, "fill ye up the measure of your fathers:" which they did by crucifying the Lord of life, and persecuting his disciples; so that upon that generation was visited, in fearful judgment, all the blood of the prophets before shed. In like manner, when under the light of the Gospel, men live and die in unbelief, the longer their lives have continued under these advantages, the more undeniably plain will their wickedness appear, in that they have passed through their whole probation, growing only worse instead of better; in that all the bounties of God's providence were abused with an unthankful heart; all the gracious invitations of the Gospel rejected, the movements of the Spirit resisted, and the very forbearance of God perverted into a motive to sin the more stoutly against him, just as we are in his word forewarned that it would be, "*Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.*" If any of my hearers

shall be found among those unhappy despisers, that "behold, and wonder, and perish," the privileges they have enjoyed, the knowledge they have possessed, the motives they have resisted, the affectionate entreaties they have slighted, the solemn providences they have disregarded, and the urgent and frequent remonstrances of conscience, which they have neglected, as well as all their sinful actions, will be spread before an assembled world, and satisfactorily show that God has employed every suitable means for their reformation; that their ruin is chargeable to themselves alone; while their own lips will loudly attest the justice of their fearful doom; and through all eternity, the remembrance of these advantages perverted, will sting like the adder, and bite like the scorpion.

Since, then, so long as the wicked live, they are enjoying the opportunity to become reconciled to God; their continuance may be greatly beneficial to others; they may, even in their greatest wickedness, be doing that which shall invigorate the piety, and brighten the crown of the saints; they are furnishing clear illustration of the riches of God's forbearance and of his unparalleled kindness;—and they are giving undeniable evidence of that future judgment they often deny, and yet dread; and are hourly treasuring up materials to render more abundantly conspicuous the equity of that sentence, which shall cover them with eternal confusion; let us hush every murmur, and banish every complaint; nay, raise the song of praise, while we ponder the question, "*Wherefore do the wicked live?*"

With one remark, I close:—*we here discern the folly of remaining unreconciled to God.*

However bold and hardened in sin, however forgetful of God, and heedless of his soul's welfare, a man may be, he is, nevertheless, in the hands of God, and he will be made to subserve God's glory, and the welfare of God's true people, whether he wishes it or not. The trial of each sinner is going on every day; and continually is he becoming more fitted for the doom that awaits him: and that doom, unless he become a new creature in Christ Jesus, is everlasting wretchedness. No correctness of morals, no inoffensiveness of life, can wipe out the guilt of rebellion against God, or screen from the curse consequent on rejecting the Savior. Nothing will serve as a substitute for a contrite heart, and a living faith. We may hesitate, and object, and delay, and scoff as we please;—such conduct will, indeed, ripen us for destruction; but it does not alter God's terms, nor relax his hold upon us. *We are in his hands*; and if we do not choose to submit to him, and just on his own terms too, we but pull down vengeance on our own heads: we make a bed for ourselves in hell. By every sneer, and every cavil, we are but inscribing in the archives of heaven the evidence that our condemnation is just.

We may as well hope to silence the roaring ocean with a frown,—we may as well attempt to blot out the sun, or to chain the winds, as to rush beyond the reach of the Almighty, or to change the conditions on which we hold our being. It is the message of the Gospel, it is the song of heaven, it is the glory of the church,—it is the confession of hell's deepest caverns, "*There is no safety, but in Christ.*" AMEN.



## SERMON LXXXIX.

By WILLIAM MITCHELL, A.M.

NEWTOWN, (CONN.)

### THE FACILITY WITH WHICH SINNERS GO TO DESTRUCTION.

MATTHEW, vii. 13. *Enter ye in at the strait gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat.*

HE who made the human soul, and laid down his life for its redemption, knows perfectly well what is necessary to salvation, and knows our liability to be ruined by a delusive hope. In the greatness of his compassion, with his omniscient eye upon the deceitfulness of the heart, and the many temptations of the world, he has clearly described the Christian character, and the character of every traveller in the broad way. He has exhibited the features of the carnal man and the spiritual man in the nicest shades of distinction; presenting to the vision of the one unclouded immortality, and to the vision of the other the horrors of everlasting death. The path of life is made so plain that "the wayfaring men, though fools, need not err therein." But notwithstanding all the light shed from heaven on the ways of wisdom, there are "*few that be saved.*" Such is the blindness and desperate wickedness of men, that the multitude throng the broad way, bent on their own destruction, in despite of the entreaties and the mercies of the Lord. The very fact that Christ and the apostles have mingled their instructions to the churches with so many warnings, and enjoined the same upon their successors in the sacred office to the end of the world, implies that all men are extremely prone to slide in the downward road to perdition, and implies, too, that "many there be which go in thereat." The text is a direct assertion of this truth. In this and the preceding chapter, Christ had fully taught his disciples the necessity of personal holiness—had taught them what duties to perform, what errors to avoid; and then, setting before them in one distinct view the dangers that awaited them, and the importance of strenuous effort, he said, "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth to life, and few there be that find it.—Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? and then will I profess unto them I never knew you: depart from

me ye that work iniquity." If all this is said of those who profess to be disciples, and who stand high in the esteem of men for sanctity and eminent gifts, what will the end be of the multitude who openly despise religion? "And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" The text, as we said, is a direct assertion of the truth that many will be lost. And this is the reason assigned by the Redeemer, why the few who are saved should strive for entrance at the strait gate. "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for [because] wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat."

The passage then leads us to *consider the facility with which sinners go to destruction*. This will appear,

1. FROM THE FACT THAT IT IS AGREEABLE TO THE NATURE OF MAN TO PURSUE A SINFUL COURSE.

The *natural* character of *all men* as delineated in the Scriptures is this:—*They roll sin as a sweet morsel under the tongue. They love darkness rather than light. Their hearts are fully set in them to do evil. They possess the carnal mind which is enmity against God. They are dead in trespasses and sins. The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.* Now if the heart of man in its natural state, "out of which are the issues of life," is thus in love with sin, and thus at enmity with holiness, it is obvious that he will continue on in a course of sin, till aroused to his danger and transformed "from fool to wise, from earthly to divine." But how few, in comparison with the multitude, are thus aroused, and turn their feet into "the narrow way." The desire of happiness, including with it the inseparable desire of avoiding misery, is an essential part of our constitution. And the things agreeable to our nature seem to be the only things which can make us happy. Accordingly, with the heart wholly in love with sin, and the understanding blinded to the chief good, holiness—the natural man is fully persuaded that the pleasures of sin will make him happy, while godliness would rob him of his present enjoyments. He is thus persuaded, because sinful pleasures are agreeable to his depraved nature, and the pleasures of holiness are contrary to his nature. And therefore after all his reflection, he still clings to the belief that holiness in this life would make him at least less happy than the pleasures of sin; and consequent upon this belief he holds on in his course of depravity, choosing in his own estimation the greatest apparent good. And now, if "the wages of sin is death," and "to be carnally minded is death;" and if sin is altogether agreeable to the natural heart; and if it is very difficult, impossible indeed without grace, to persuade the transgressor to exchange the things he dearly loves, for things which he cordially hates, then it is easy for him to continue in sin, and go to destruction. *How easy* it is, is manifest from the fact that so vast a multitude disregard the warnings of the Gospel for the present, and slide into the grave unrenewed; cheated by "the thief of time" out of the convenient season on which they relied for repentance.

2. The facility with which men go to destruction is apparent FROM THE SPIRITUAL SLOTH OF THE TRANSGRESSOR.

This dreadful insensibility to eternal things natural to all men, is represented in Scripture by the words sleep and death. They are significant epi-

thets when applied to the moral condition of man. A man sleeping on the brink of destruction is in a dreadful state. A man spiritually dead to his everlasting welfare—dead while the day of grace is gliding away—is in an awful condition. And such is the state—such the condition of the sinner. The summer and the harvest are passing by, and if he do not soon sow in righteousness he can never reap in mercy. But how shall he be aroused? He has the word of God in his dwelling, and hears from Sabbath to Sabbath the promises and precepts and denunciations of this word illustrated and enforced. The spirit of grace strives with him. He experiences the mercies and the judgments of the Lord. He sees the power of religion in the conversion and subsequent life of his friends. Means various and abundant are employed to awaken him; but still he sleeps. The thunders of wrath above do not arouse him, nor the wailings of the lost beneath. The Spirit of life agitates and alarms him; but he sinks again to his slumbers, and foldeth his hands to sleep. The entreaties of his pious friends linger a moment on his arrested ear, and then pass away like a tale that is told. He dwells, it may be, where God grants a refreshing from his presence, and many enter in at the strait gate, but *he* is only a despiser of mercy, and a reviler of the just. How dreadful is the spiritual sloth of the sinner! How inefficient are the means of grace to arouse him from his lethargy, and bring him to newness of life! How awfully sure that he will sleep, and sleep, and perish everlastingly, unless God quicken him by the energies of his Spirit, and call him from death to life! Look at all the facts in the case, and you will see how deep is the slumber of the natural man, and how easy it is for him to continue in his slumbers till he awakes amid the realities of eternity to sleep no more.

3. The truth of the text is illustrated BY THE BLINDNESS OF THE CARNAL MIND.

“The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” There is no passage of Scripture better illustrated by matters of fact. The Gospel is foolishness to the sinner. He shows that it is by ridiculing every anxious inquirer after the way of salvation. He says ‘it is foolish for any to be alarmed, and in great distress concerning their future condition. There is no ground for such terrible apprehensions of wrath from a merciful God; no occasion for such abasement, and repentance, and earnestness in religion.’ The Gospel view of sin and its consequences is therefore foolishness to him. And the joys of the new-born soul are foolishness also. The saints at the Pentecost “are filled with new wine,” said the mockers standing by, and witnessing the wonders of grace. The happy convert, in the simplicity of his love, faith, and zeal, is foolish, says the sinner still. And he says a season of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, resembling the first great revival of religion, is a scene of confusion, and enthusiasm, and folly. His views are equally blind in regard to the missionary enterprise—the conversion of the world. And all the great objects of modern Christian benevolence are also foolish. It is folly to disturb the mass of unbelieving men, and to attempt to break them off from their sinful courses, and

reclaim them to "the wisdom of the just." From his own daily confession, pure and undefiled religion, in all its bearings and energies, is foolishness to the sinner. And how blind are all his views; how erroneous all his conceptions of God and the heavenly kingdom. He thinks that what men call morality will save him; and therefore he needs no repentance, faith, regeneration. He thinks that his good deeds counterbalance the evil he hath done, and therefore he needeth not salvation by grace through faith, the gift of God. He thinks a thousand erroneous things, and builds his variable hopes on many sandy foundations. Talk with him, and you will find, that "the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not." You will find him benighted in all his views of God; of duty; of Christ; of holiness; of the great salvation. How easy is it for him to remain in this spiritual darkness, and be illuminated too late only by the light of eternity.

4. THE STRENGTH OF UNBELIEF—THE MANY ALLUREMENTS OF THE WORLD, AND THE DEVICES OF SATAN, show with what facility sinners may go to destruction.

If they would believe the eternal and tremendous truths which God has revealed, they could not remain destitute of the good hope through grace. But they will not believe. And "this is their condemnation." Their whole guilt is summed up in the single word "unbelief." And the difference between the righteous and the wicked all along, in the Scriptures, consists in the fact, that the one is a believer, the other not. The unhumiliated, unrenewed sinner does not believe revealed truth. And Christ says to him, "Because I tell you the truth, ye believe me not. Which of you convinceth me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me?" Unbelief, then, is the ground of the sinner's condemnation, and the cause of his ruin. And how strong is this unbelief—how credulous of error! It resists all the warnings and exhortations, all the judgments and mercies, all the strivings of the Almighty. It collects all errors, and converts them into a strong-hold of defence against the truth. A great multitude of facts from the promulgation of the Gospel to the present hour, show us how inveterate is the prejudice of the transgressor against the truth; how strong his enmity against the light; how ineffectual are all the means of salvation to reclaim him from the error of his way, without the subduing and transforming power of the Holy Ghost. Now, with what facility may the sinner continue in the broad way and perish, thus enveloped as he is in spiritual darkness, and intrenched as he is within the strong fortress of unbelief.

*The allurements of the world* too, which tend directly to confirm the sinner in his unbelief, are in number almost like the stars of heaven. There is the legion of enticements which feed the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life. There are the many inducements to sinful honor and ambition, every one of them a lure to the carnal mind. There is the combined influence of ungodly companions, and the persecution and derision of a wicked world. All these, and more, are the opposing obstacles in the way of salvation, and many a sinner do they draw away from the very gate of heaven, back again into the broad way of destruction. Add to this *the devices of Satan*. He commenced his wily labors in Paradise, and will

pursue his prey, till he shall be finally bound with the great chain of the angel, who has the key of the bottomless pit.—(Rev. xx. 2.) If we resist the Devil, as directed by the Bible, he will flee from us. But the sinner does *not* resist him, because he has no desire to gain the victory over sin. Of his own free will and consent, he “walketh according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience.” And if there be hope that any out of the multitude of sinners shall escape from the course of this world, and the prince of the power of the air, that hope rests on this foundation; “if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the Devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.” We cannot ascertain with any degree of accuracy the extent of influence exercised by this great adversary, over the minds of men; nor can we understand the mode of his operation. But the Scriptures assign him a conspicuous place in the work of man’s destruction, from the defection in Eden to the present time. Paul says, Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. And on one occasion he said, For your sakes forgave I it, lest Satan should get an advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices. Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the Devil, &c. Peter, too, thus exhorts the saints: Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary, the Devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about seeking whom he may devour. Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world.

Now if the saint need to guard himself so vigilantly against the wiles of the Devil, how great is his influence over the children of disobedience? And this influence, united with the strong unbelief of the sinner, and the allurements of the world, must render it easy for him to continue in the broad way that leadeth to destruction.

5. THE EFFECT OF THINGS PRESENT, COMPARED WITH THE INFLUENCE OF THINGS DISTANT, still further illustrates the truth of the text.

Present good exerts a strong influence against the importance of distant good. The child will prefer a small gift to-day, to a greater one to-morrow. And this is one of the traits of natural character. The sinner seizes on the present good, and regards salvation as a distant thing. Sinful pleasures may be enjoyed *now*, but heaven seems to be afar off; and this exerts no small influence in determining his present choice. If eternal things were present equally with earthly things, the natural man would view them differently, but he considers eternal things as distant, and for this reason they lose much of their importance in his esteem, and he turns his attention and pursuit to the things at hand, intending hereafter to attend to the distant concerns of his future state. It is true, indeed, that he may die at any moment, and be ushered instantly into the unseen realities which appear to be afar off. But he regards these unseen and unfelt realities as distant, because he counts, presumptuously enough, on length of days, and the forbearance of God, and the opportunity of being saved at the eleventh hour. With this groundless belief, the things of redemption appear to him to lie quiet and secure, in the regions



of futurity. And when time shall have drifted him along to the confines of this futurity, he believes that he shall lay hold on the hope of eternal life, and enter on the rest which remains for the people of God. Under the influence of these erroneous views, he chooses the present good, and how easily may he drop into the "everlasting burnings," from this dying world, while relying for safety on future amendment! It were well if the Christian should inquire, how far, in this respect, his conduct and views correspond with the sinner's presumption.

6. THE IMPERFECTIONS AND SINS OF PROFESSING CHRISTIANS, make the broad way still broader.

"Ye are the light of the world. Ye are the salt of the earth," said the Savior. These are very significant comparisons. If the Church is the only light of the world; and if this light become dim, the transgressor will discern the narrow way very obscurely. The men of God will seem "like trees walking," as in the case of the blind man beginning to recover his sight. If the light of the Church be wholly extinguished, or if it be put under a bushel, "a horror of great darkness" will descend upon the world. *Ye are the salt of the earth.* If the Church only is the salt, and this salt shall lose its savor, then the whole mass will go to putrefaction together, and the unsavory salt will hasten on the process of corruption. For what purpose has God cast the salt into the fountains of evil, and kindled a light in this dark world? "Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let *your* light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

If the Church universal felt the full import of this language, and lived in accordance with these precepts, the broad way would be much narrower, and trodden by a smaller throng of travellers. But the imperfections and sins of the best Christians are many, and ruinous are the consequences. The sinner is kept quiet on his way, and confirmed in his unbelief. If they who profess Christ, he says, are so bad, and yet will be saved, surely I who am so honest as to make no pretensions to godliness, and yet have done many good works, cannot fail of salvation. Thus encouraged by high example, he stumbles, and falls to rise no more. Merciful God! keep the skirts of thy people's garments from being stained with the blood of souls!

7. THE EXAMPLE OF THE MULTITUDE demonstrates the facility with which men go to destruction.

This is the very reason Christ assigns, why the disciples should agonize to enter in at the strait gate. The way to life is narrow, and the gate is strait, and "few there be that find it." The way to destruction is broad, and the gate is wide, and "many go in thereat." This multitude, going in company the broad way, mutually encourage each other. They are the great majority—the world is pursuing this course, and the merciful God, say they, cannot destroy so many.

Encompass'd by a throng,  
 On numbers they depend;  
 They say, so many can't be wrong,  
 And miss a happy end.

The simple fact that so great a multitude are crowding along through the wide gate, furnishes a reason why they continue in their ruinous course. They imagine their safety to be in proportion to their numbers. As if a host could contend with the Almighty, and wrest from him the sceptre of dominion, or prevail on him to change his unalterable purpose "by no means to clear the guilty." Thus they go hand in hand, strengthening each other's bands, till "the destruction of the transgressors, and of the sinners, shall be together, and they that forsake the Lord shall be consumed. And the strong shall be as tow, and the maker of it as a spark, and they shall both burn together, and none shall quench them."

Another reason why the multitude encourage each other in the broad way, is found in the *stillness which broods over the grave and the world of departed spirits*. It is natural for us all to feel, and desire to believe, that the grave is a place where all the weary are at rest, and all troubles find their end. But the Scriptures assure us, that the conscious spirit enters, at its departure from this world, into happiness or misery, according to the works done in the body; and that the body itself lies in its resting place, till it awakes to the resurrection of life, or the resurrection of damnation. The departed Lazarus, in the parable, is said to be "in Abraham's bosom"—"the rich man in hell, being in torments." On the mount of transfiguration, Moses and Elias were with Christ and the three disciples, constituting an assembly from earth and heaven. The grave, then, is, for all, the suspension of *bodily*, but not of *spiritual* suffering. But the multitude will not believe these revealed truths. They say, none have returned from the unknown world to inform us of their state. We do not know but all are happy there, and we will hope in the mercy of God, without disquieting ourselves with things beyond our knowledge. The pious Baxter has well illustrated this subject, the security of the sinner from his ignorance of the fate of those who have departed from the present state. "A man was driving a flock of fat lambs, upon a bridge over the Severn. Something meeting them and hindering their passage, one of the lambs leaped upon the wall of the bridge, and his legs slipping from under him, he fell into the stream; the rest, seeing him, did, one after one, leap over the bridge into the stream, and were all, or almost all, drowned. Those that were behind did little know what was become of them that were gone before, but thought they might venture to follow their companions; but as soon as ever they were over the wall, and falling headlong, the case was altered. Even so it is with unconverted carnal men. One dieth by them, and drops into hell, and another follows the same way; and yet they will go after them, because they think not whither they are gone. Oh! but when death hath once opened their eyes, and they see what is on the other side of the wall, even in another world; then what would they give to be where they were!"

Very evident it is, then, that the gate is wide, and the way is broad that

leadeth to destruction, and many go in thereat. *A sinful course is so agreeable to depraved nature—so great is the spiritual sloth of the natural man—such the blindness of the carnal mind—such the strength of unbelief—so many are the allurements of the world, and the devices of Satan—such the effect of things present, compared with the influence of things distant—so numerous are the imperfections of professing Christians—and such the force of example, the example of the multitude,* that the facility with which men go to destruction is tremendously fearful. And if so, how terrible to the sinner is the declaration of Christ concerning the wide gate, and the broad way!

We now close the subject with one reflection: *It is a very difficult thing to be saved.*

The many obstacles we have enumerated must be overcome, or we inevitably perish. And we may well ask, with the disciples, "Who then can be saved?" But men in their natural character will believe that it is *easy* to enter in at the strait gate—that it is a thing to be accomplished whenever it suits their convenience. That the world may be sought *first*, and the kingdom of heaven *last*, and yet the soul be saved. Ah! do you know more of these things than Christ? Do you dispute the truth of his word when he says, "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and *many there be which go in thereat*: because strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and *few there be that find it*?" The righteous "through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of heaven"—"the righteous scarcely be saved," and if so, "where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" Have you considered, that while you neglect salvation, time is hurrying you to that world where no ray of hope can penetrate the everlasting darkness—where despair, surveying the walls of her prison house, shall, age after age, lift up her broken voice, and ask, *how long?* and on the anxious ear shall come back no answer, but,—*for ever!* Awake, awake now, lest you knock at heaven's gate when none shall open. To-day, harden not your heart. Behold, *now* is the accepted time; now the day of salvation. Escape for thy life; tarry not in all the plain, lest thou be consumed!